HORTUS CONCLUSUS

Medieval Gardens of Delight, Imagination, and Sacred Thought in Cistercian Architecture

Research Aims & Questions

1. How do monastic texts (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux) articulate garden symbolism as a locus of purity, enclosure, and divine order?

2. In what ways does the Cistercian cloister garden embody architectural expressions of austerity, light, and proportion distinct from courtly garden traditions?

3. Can a design research intervention that re interprets the cloister's spatial and sensory qualities offer a viable model for modern minimalist architecture?

Methodology

1. Textual Analysis
2. Architectural Survey
3. Symbolic Mapping
4. Case Study
5. Design Research Intervention

Chapter 1

The Garden in the Medieval Imagination: Symbolism, Allegory, and Space

Figure 1. Assyrian Relief of the Banquet of Ashurbanipal From Nineveh N Palace, Gypsum, British Museum. 645-650 BCE. (phot by © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Figure 2. Lochner, Stefan. Madonna in the Rose Garden (Madonna im Rosenhag). Ca. 1450. Oil on panel. Wallraf-Richartz Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne. (photo by Wallraf-Richartz Museum & Fondation Corboud. Shared under a Cre ative Commons licence)

Figure 3. Upper Rhenish Master. The Garden of Paradise (Frankfurt Paradiesgärtlein). Ca. 1410. Tempera and oil on panel. Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. (photo by Städel Museum – U. Edelmann. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

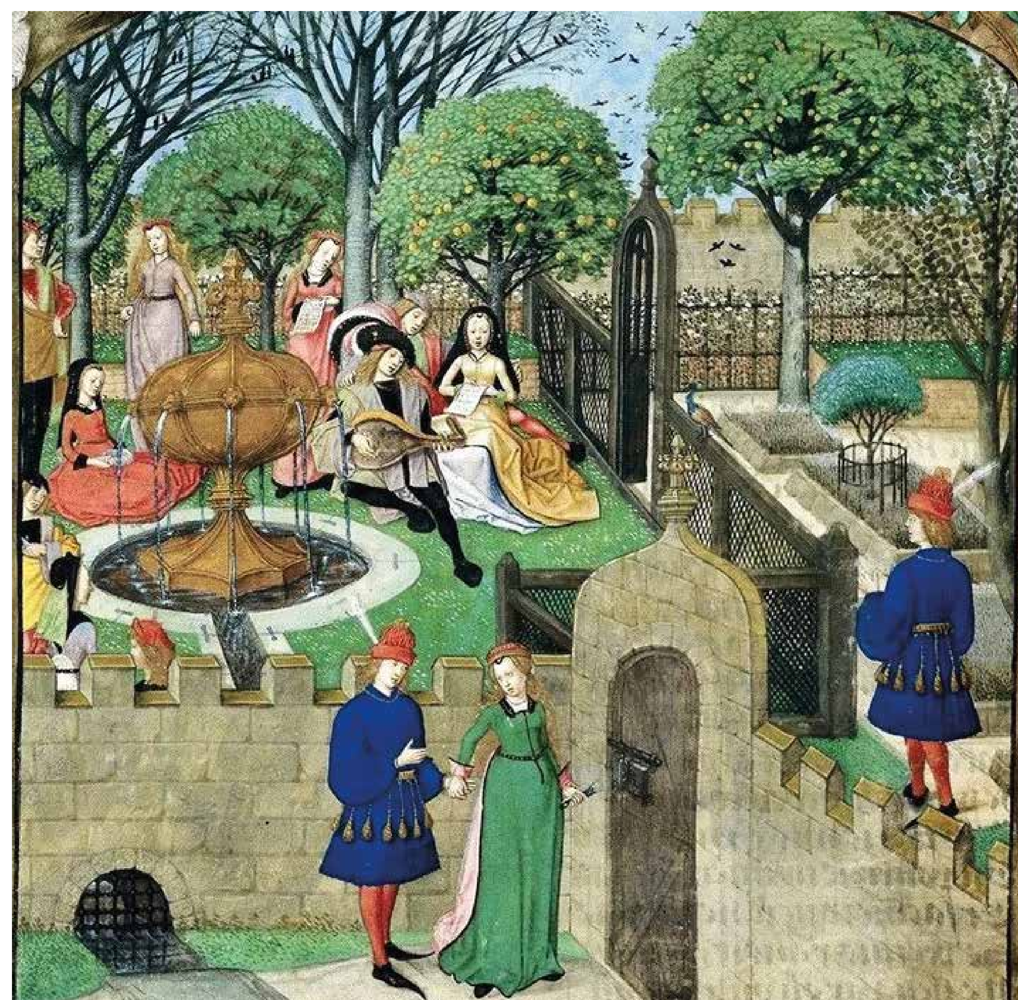


Figure 4. Miniature in an edition of the 15th century of Le Roman de la Rose. In Matteo e Virgilio Vercelloni con la collaborazione di Paola Gallo. L'invenzione del giardino occidentale. Milano: Electa, 2003, 31.

Chapter 1 examines the medieval garden as a complex symbolic and spatial construct shaped by biblical, theological, literary, and cultural traditions. Beginning with the Garden of Eden, the garden is presented as both memory of a lost paradise and anticipation of celestial redemption — a dual temporality that rendered it a privileged site for negotiating salvation, desire, and discipline. Through its etymological roots (pairi-daeza, paradeisos, hortus), the garden emerges fundamentally as an enclosed and defined space, where boundaries generate meaning by mediating inside and outside, order and chaos, eternity and time.

The chapter traces the development of the hortus conclusus, rooted in the Song of Songs, which became central to Marian devotion. The enclosed garden symbolized purity, divine love, healing, and the Virgin's immaculate body, transforming biblical metaphor into architectural and artistic form. Simultaneously, medieval secular literature reimagined the garden as the "garden of love," a locus amoenus of courtly desire, performance, and social power. Sacred and profane traditions thus coexisted, producing an ambivalent symbolic vocabulary in which gardens signified both salvation and temptation.

Beyond theology and literature, the garden functioned as cultural discourse. Enclosure became a metaphor for gender, purity, and moral control, aligning the cultivated garden with the regulated body. Yet this symbolism remained unstable and multivalent, allowing for tensions between protection and constraint, discipline and desire.

The chapter concludes by outlining three theoretical frameworks: the symbolism of space (where geometry and order express divine rationality), the transformation of the classical locus amoenus into a moralized Christian model, and spatial allegory, through which gardens operate as "readable" environments encoding cosmological and ethical meaning.

Together, these perspectives establish the medieval garden — and especially the monastic cloister — not as decorative landscape, but as a disciplined microcosm where theology, culture, embodiment, and architecture converge.

Chapter 2

Cistercian Thought and Architectural Purism

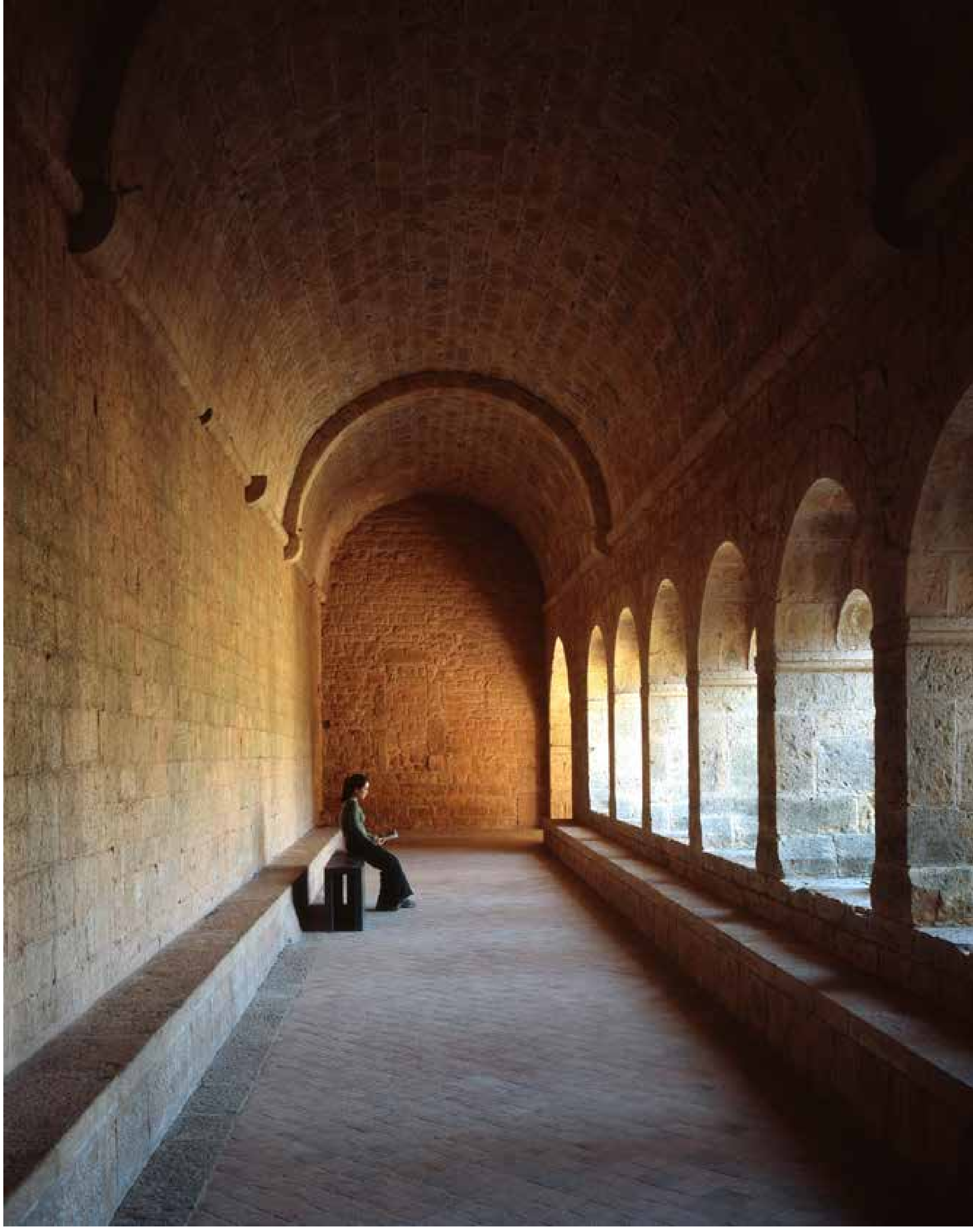


Figure 5. Le Thoronet Abbey. Leçons du Thoronet, Provence, France, 2006 (photo by Hisao Suzuki. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Figure 6. Le Thoronet Abbey. Leçons du Thoronet, Provence, France, 2006 (photo by Hisao Suzuki. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

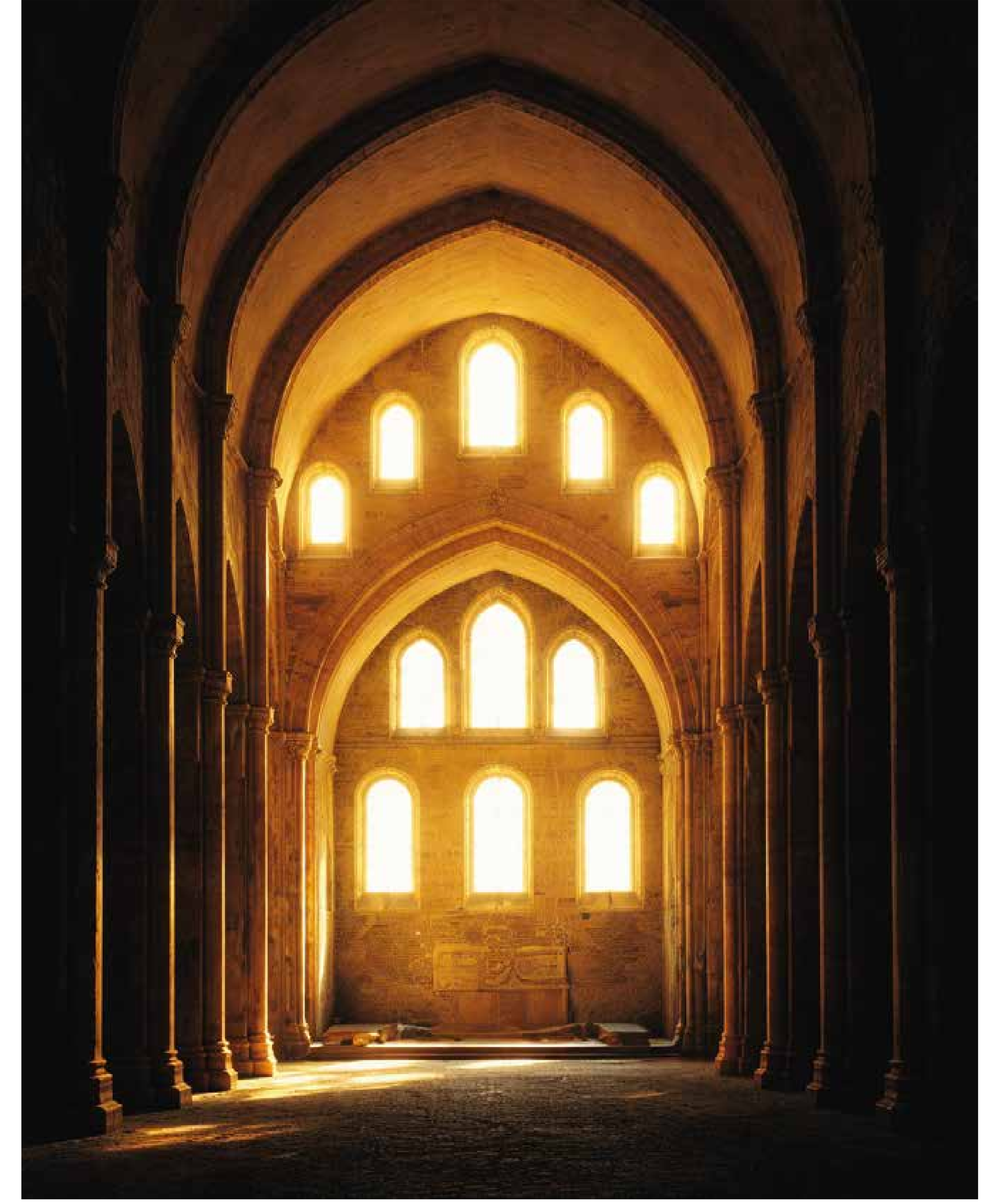


Figure 7. Fontenay Abbey, Côte-d'Or, France. (photo taken © Editions Gelbart. Shared under a Creative Common licence)

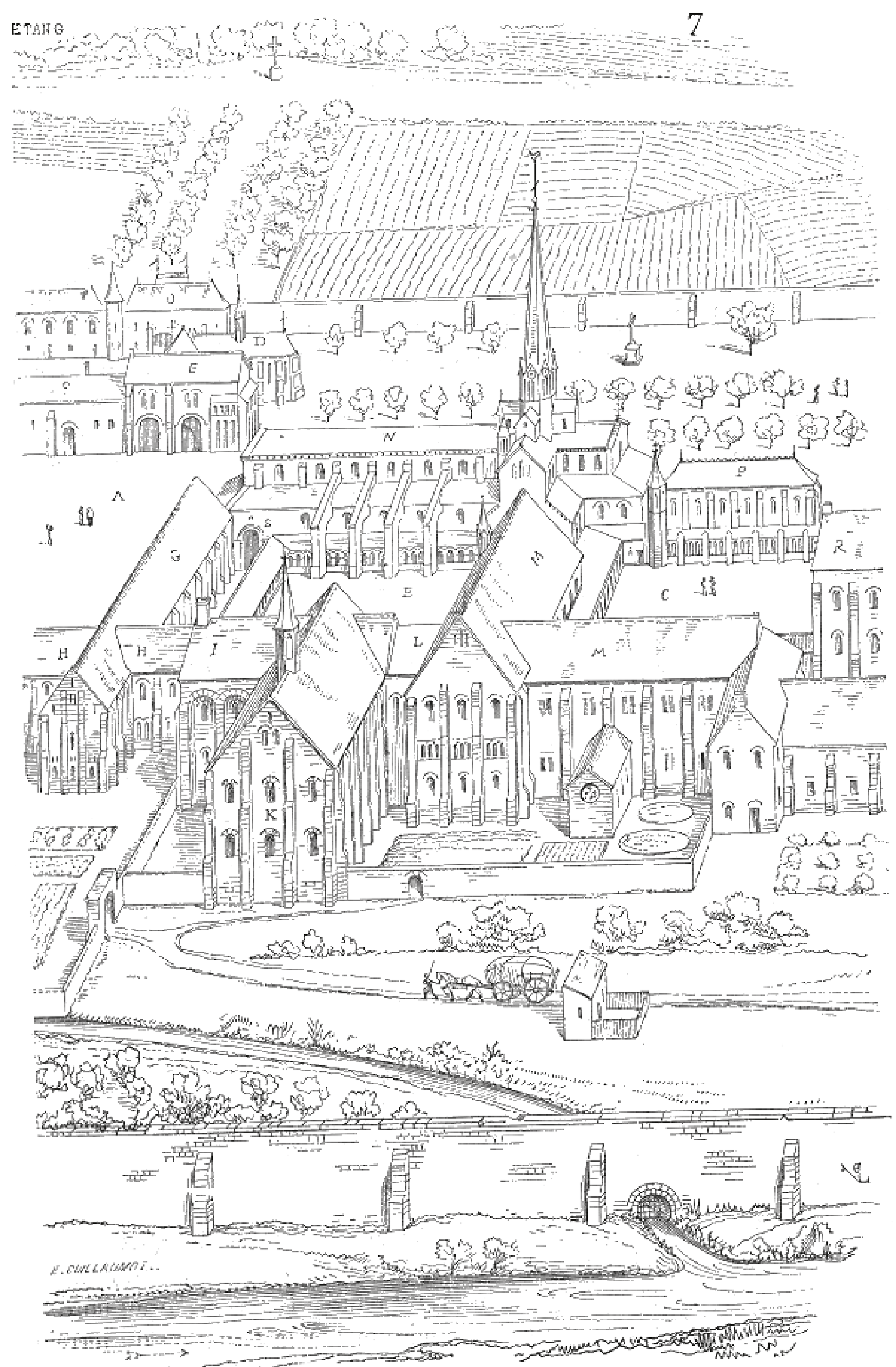


Figure 8. Plan cavalier de l'abbaye de Cîteaux. Issue from Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle, by Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Figure 9. San Bernardo, Correa de Vivar, Juan. (photo taken by ©Museo Nacional del Prado. Shared under a Creative Common licence)

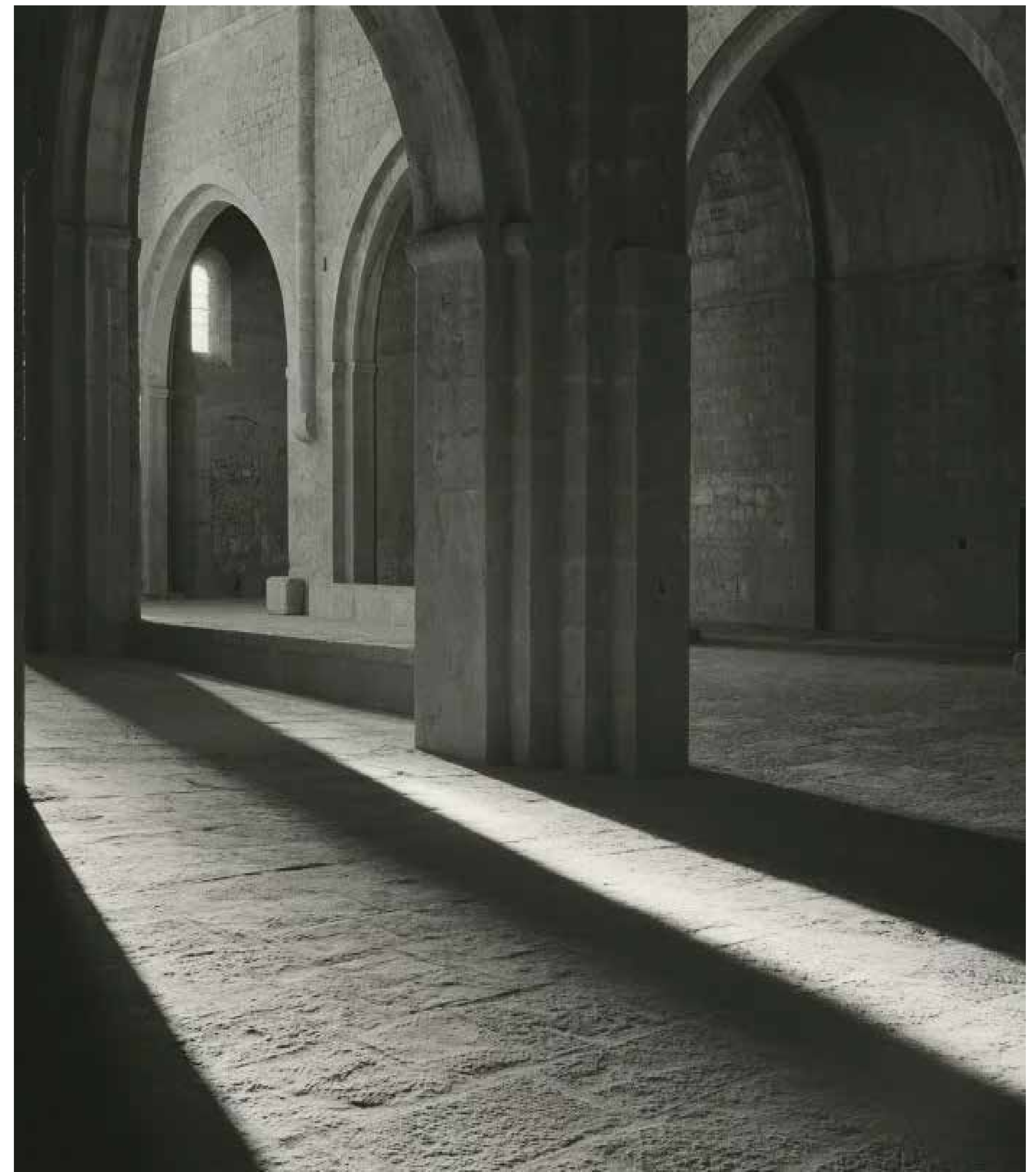


Figure 10. "Église : en premier plan, le collatéral sud ; au fond, le collatéral nord [Abbaye du Thoronet (Var)]" © Lucien Hervé / Dist. Centre des monuments nationaux

Chapter 2 examines the historical, theological, and spatial foundations of Cistercian architecture, situating it within the reform movement initiated in 1098 at Cîteaux by Robert of Molesme and his companions. Reacting against the wealth and magnificence of Benedictine and Cluniac monasteries, the Cistercians sought to restore the original spirit of the Rule of St. Benedict through poverty, manual labor, isolation, and contemplative rigor. Their withdrawal into remote landscapes was not incidental but ideological: geography itself became the first architectural gesture of reform.

Central to the consolidation of this vision was Bernard of Clairvaux, whose Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem articulated a powerful critique of ecclesiastical splendor. In opposition to the Cluniac theology of light and ornament associated with figures such as Suger of Saint-Denis, Bernard rejected the idea that sensory beauty leads the soul toward God. Instead, he proposed an aesthetics of restraint: architecture must discipline the senses, eliminate distraction, and cultivate interior recollection. This position, later defined as "architectural purism," did not reject beauty itself, but redefined it as clarity, proportion, and structural truth.

From this theological stance emerged a coherent philosophy of space. Cistercian monasteries were conceived as closed spiritual ecosystems in which architecture, landscape, labor, and prayer formed an integrated whole. Geometric order — often structured through square-based modules — ensured legibility and rational coherence. Light was moderated, ornament suppressed, and materiality reduced to local stone and tectonic essentials. The monastery functioned as an officina, a workshop for holiness, where spatial simplicity reinforced spiritual discipline.

Nature, too, was subjected to rational transformation. Founded in marginal territories, Cistercian abbeys reshaped marshes, valleys, and forests through water management and agricultural systems, aligning labor with divine order. The cloister garden, placed at the heart of the complex, condensed this worldview into a microcosm of enclosure, silence, and regulated movement.

Exemplary abbeys such as Fontenay Abbey and Le Thoronet Abbey embody these principles: harmonic proportion, restrained light, and unadorned surfaces generate spaces of profound stillness. Their enduring architectural relevance, admired even by modern figures such as Le Corbusier, underscores the coherence and timelessness of Cistercian spatial thought.

Ultimately, Chapter 2 demonstrates that Cistercian architecture is not merely a stylistic phenomenon but the material expression of a disciplined theology. Through proportion, enclosure, material restraint, and territorial organization, the Order transformed architecture into an ethical and spiritual instrument — a built form of reform.

Chapter 3

The Cistercian Cloister Garden: Spatial Practice and Symbolic Form

Chapter 3 analyzes the Cistercian cloister garden as the most concentrated architectural expression of the Order's spiritual and spatial ideology. Positioned at the heart of the monastery, the cloister functions simultaneously as circulation space, contemplative core, and disciplined hortus conclusus. Unlike Marian or courtly enclosed gardens, the Cistercian cloister rejects allegorical richness and figurative imagery, transforming enclosure into an abstract condition of silence, proportion, and withdrawal.

Architecturally, the cloister follows a rigorously geometric logic. Typically organized on a square or near-square plan and structured through ad quadratum proportional systems, it reflects the rational clarity codified under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux. The so-called Bernardine plan conceives the monastery as an integrated organism governed by measurable relationships rather than ornament or spectacle. Geometry, rather than decoration, becomes the primary vehicle of meaning.

Within this restrained framework, design elements are minimal and disciplined. Water appears in controlled, functional forms; vegetation is limited to grass, herbs, or symbolic trees; ornamented flowerbeds and narrative programs are absent. Most significantly, the cloister's central void operates as a deliberate architectural strategy. This emptiness is not lack but presence: a spatial manifestation of monastic withdrawal, communal silence, and interior recollection.

The chapter further emphasizes the experiential dimension of the cloister. Daily movement through the arcades establishes rhythmic bodily discipline; modulated light creates a luminous yet undramatic atmosphere; subtle sounds heighten awareness through sensory reduction. The cloister also acts as a temporal instrument, its appearance shifting with liturgical cycles and seasons, reinforcing cyclical sacred time.

Comparative analysis highlights the cloister's radical specificity. In contrast to Cluniac and Benedictine precedents, it replaces figural decoration with geometric purity. Unlike courtly gardens, it excludes performative, erotic, or political symbolism. Unlike Marian imagery, it avoids representational allegory. The Cistercian cloister garden thus emerges as a purified form of enclosure — less a symbol to be read than a discipline to be inhabited.

Ultimately, Chapter 3 demonstrates that the Cistercian cloister garden is not decorative landscape but architectural theology: a rational, restrained, and lived microcosm where geometry, void, movement, and silence shape spiritual identity.

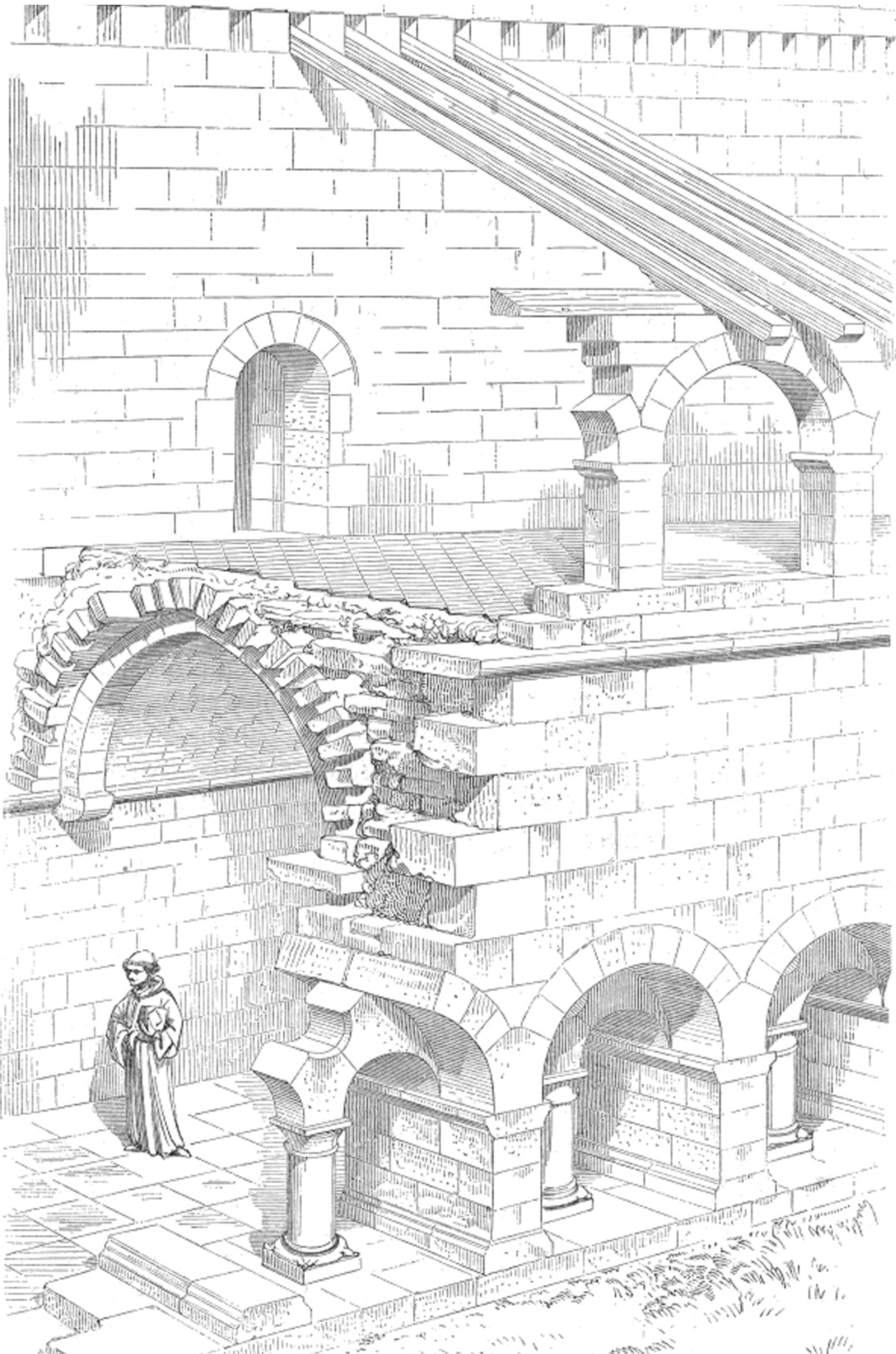


Figure 11. Le Thoronet Abbey. Provence, France, 2006 (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Figure 12. Le Thoronet Abbey. Provence, France. (photo by Hisao Suzuki. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

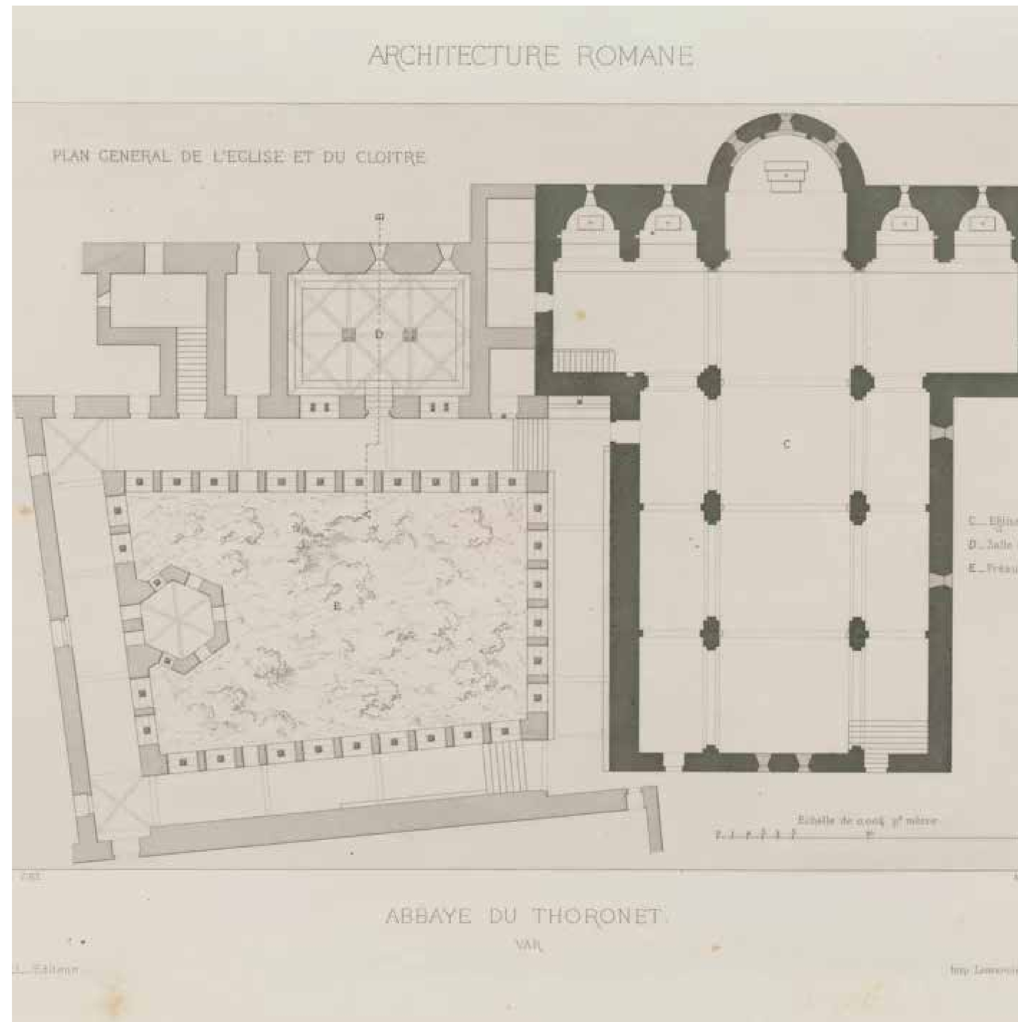


Figure 13. Architecture romane. Abbaye du Thoronet. Plan général de l'église et du cloître" © Reproduction Benjamin Gavaudo / CMN

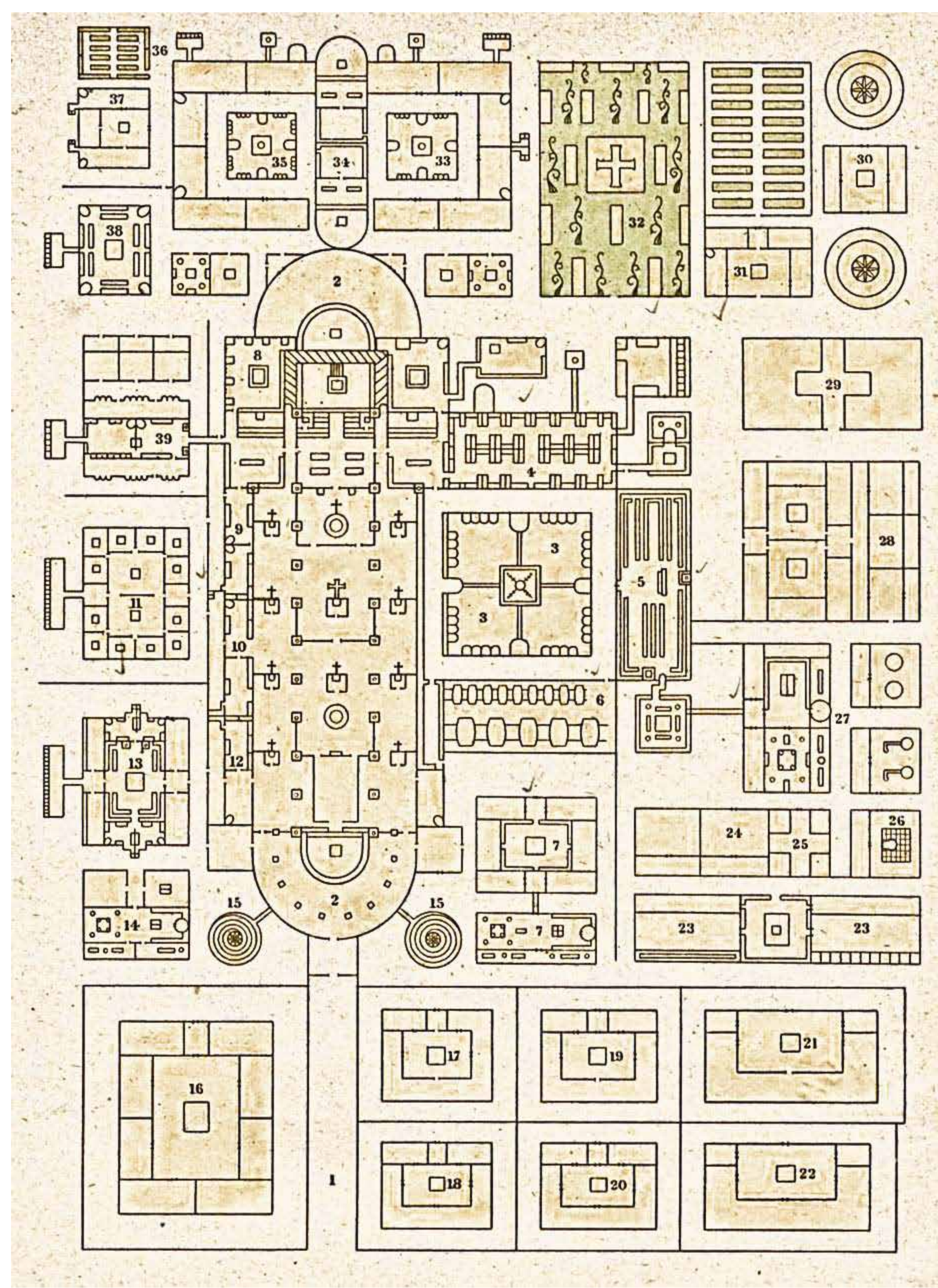


Figure 14. Ground plan, St. Gall monastery, Switzerland. Scanned from Vol. 1, 9th edition of an EB (1875); initial upload to en.wikipedia by Malcolm Farmer

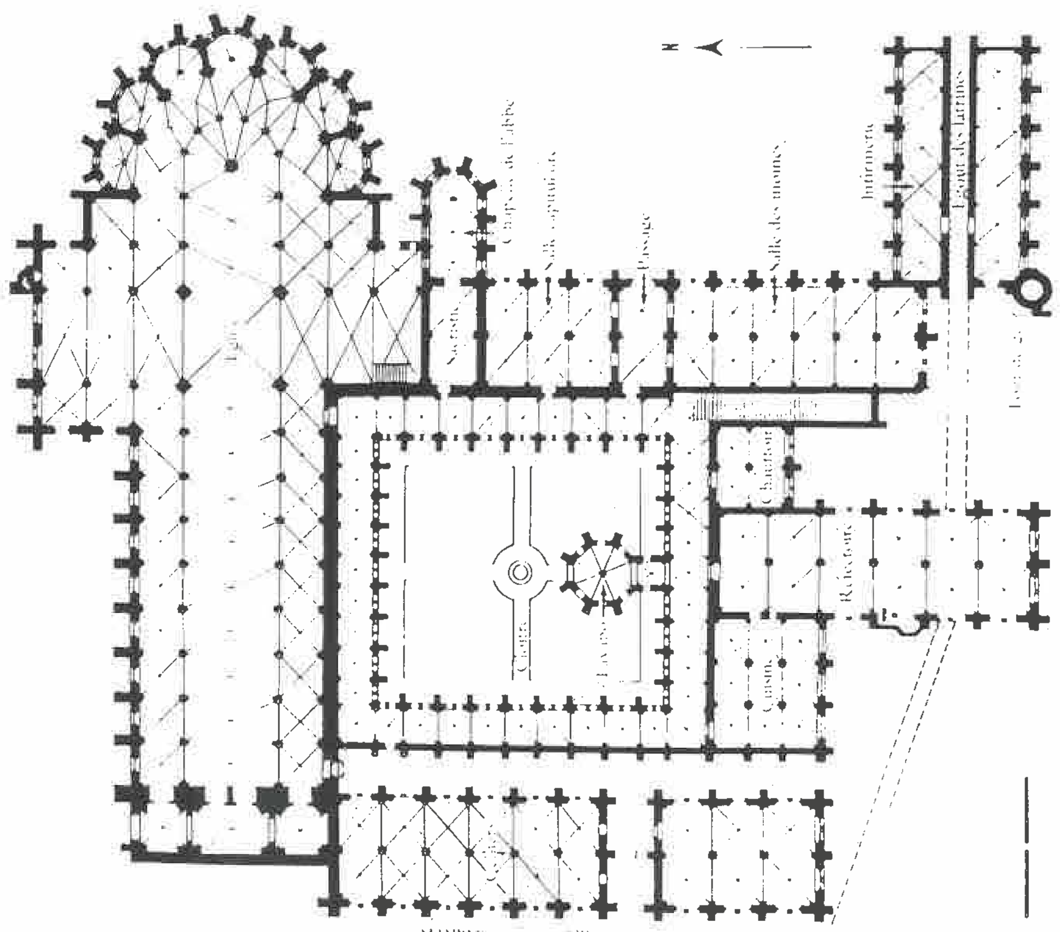


Figure 15. Royaumont. *In* Viti, Goffredo, ed. Architettura cistercense: Fontenay e le abbazie in Italia dal 1120 al 1160. Casamari: Edizioni Casamari; Firenze: Certosa di Firenze, 1995. 35

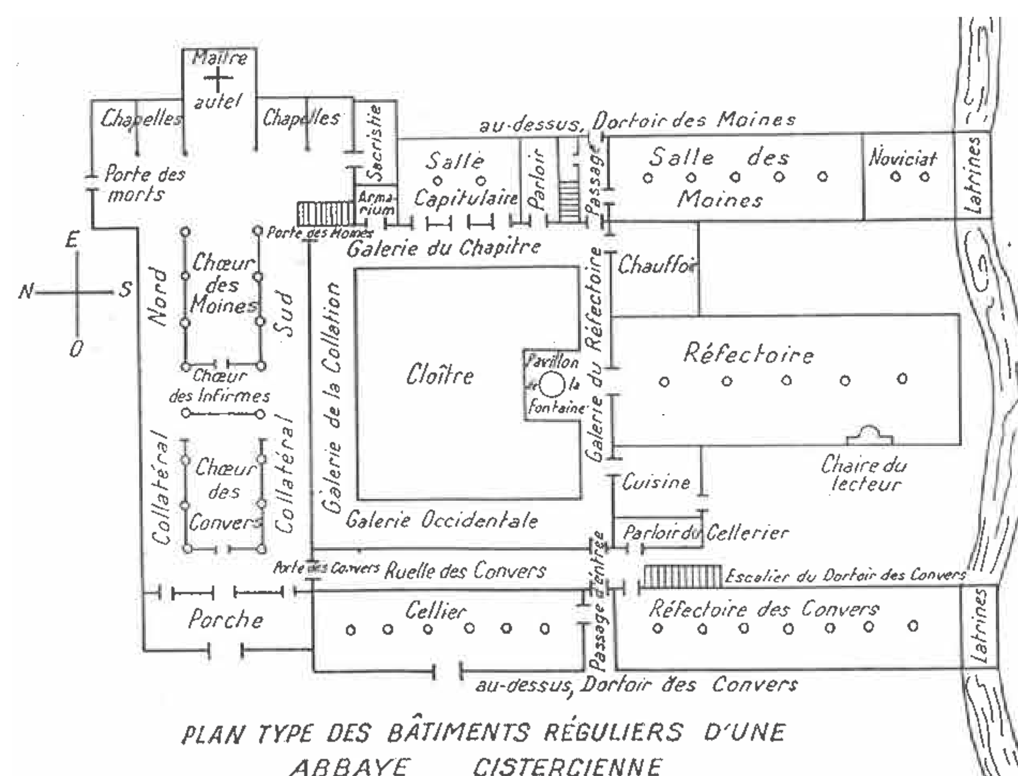


Figure 16. Tipological Plan by Aubert. *In* Viti, Goffredo, ed. Architettura cistercense: Fontenay e le abbazie in Italia dal 1120 al 1160. Casamari: Edizioni Casamari; Firenze: Certosa di Firenze, 1995. 37

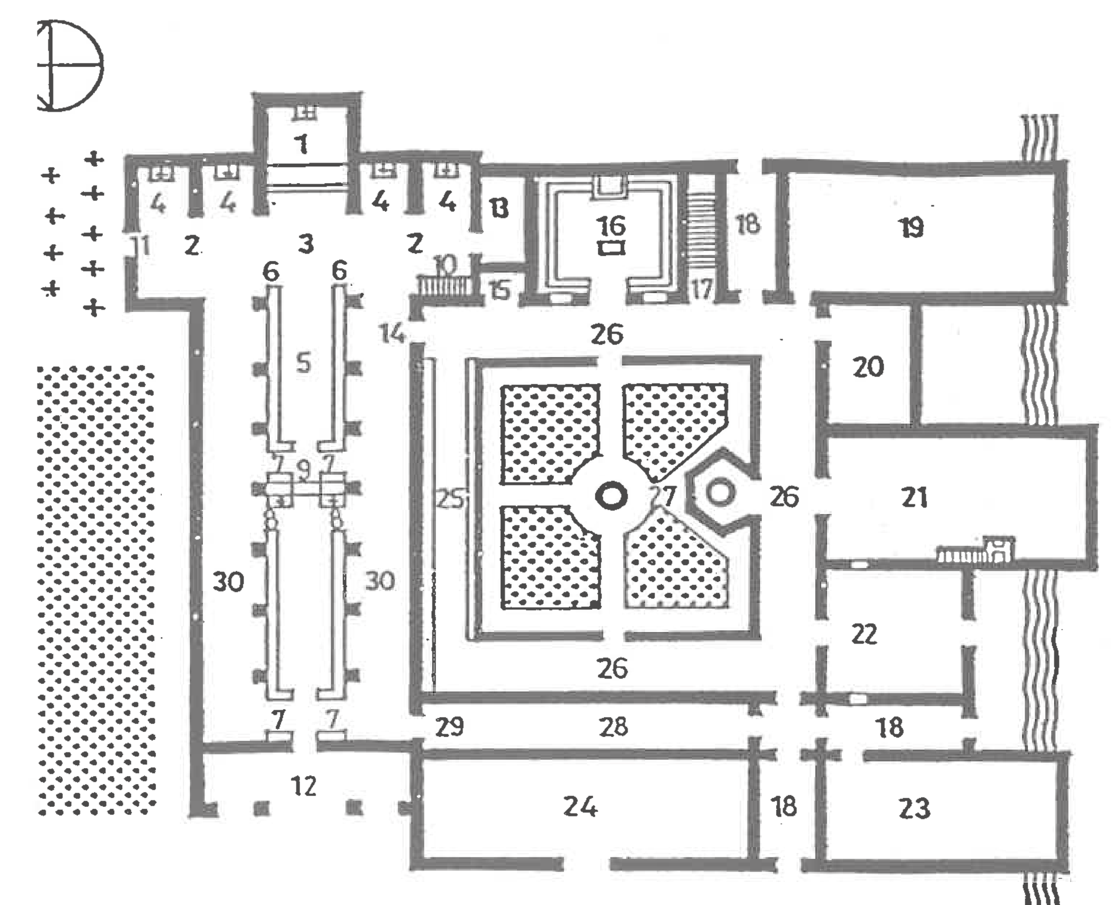


Figure 17. Tipological Plan by Hervay. *In* Viti, Goffredo, ed. Architettura cistercense: Fontenay e le abbazie in Italia dal 1120 al 1160. Casamari: Edizioni Casamari; Firenze: Certosa di Firenze, 1995. 40

Chapter 4

Case Study: The Abbey of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba

Figure 15. Main Facade of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

Methodological Selection

Bernard of Clairvaux: Key Spatial Concepts
(Textual Axes)

A. Paupertas formalis (Formal poverty)
Rejection of ornament, images, sensory excess
(Apologia, §§12–29)

B. Mensura (Measure and proportion)
Architecture as moral discipline
(Sermones in Cantica, esp. Sermons 23–25)

C. Silentium (Silence and recollection)
Space as instrument of interiority
(Epist. 106; Sermon 74)

D. Separatio (Enclosure and withdrawal)
True enclosure is spiritual before physical
(Apologia, §20)

E. Interior hortus (Inner garden)
The garden as soul, not spectacle
(Sermones in Cantica, Sermon 11; 46)

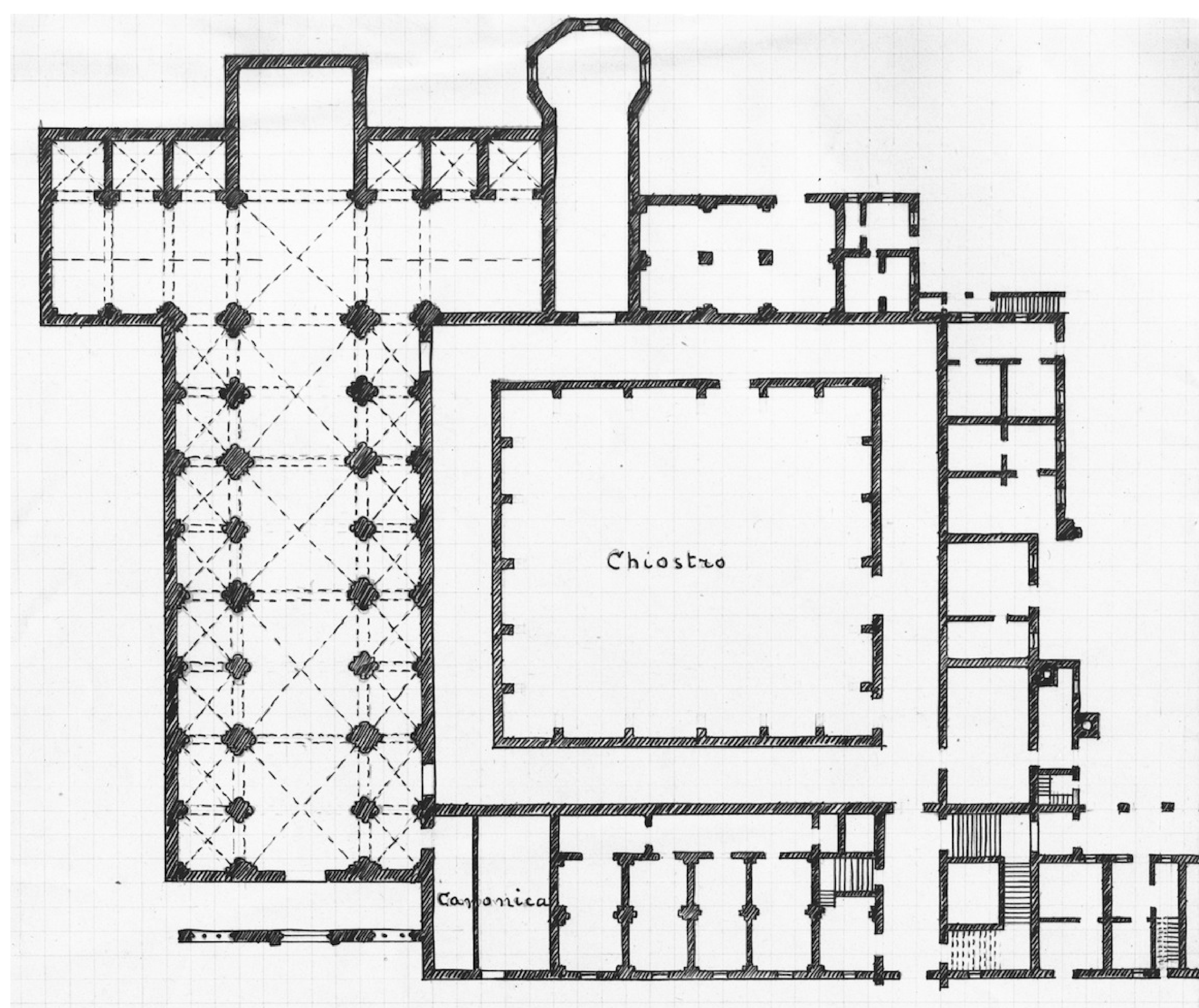


Figure 16. "Alseno (Piacenza)/ Abbazia di Chiaravalle della/ Colomba. Pianta della Chiesa e dell'ex/ Monastero" negative photographic print, XX first half (approx. 1926–1940), Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Ministry of Culture (Italy). Accessed February 19, 2026.

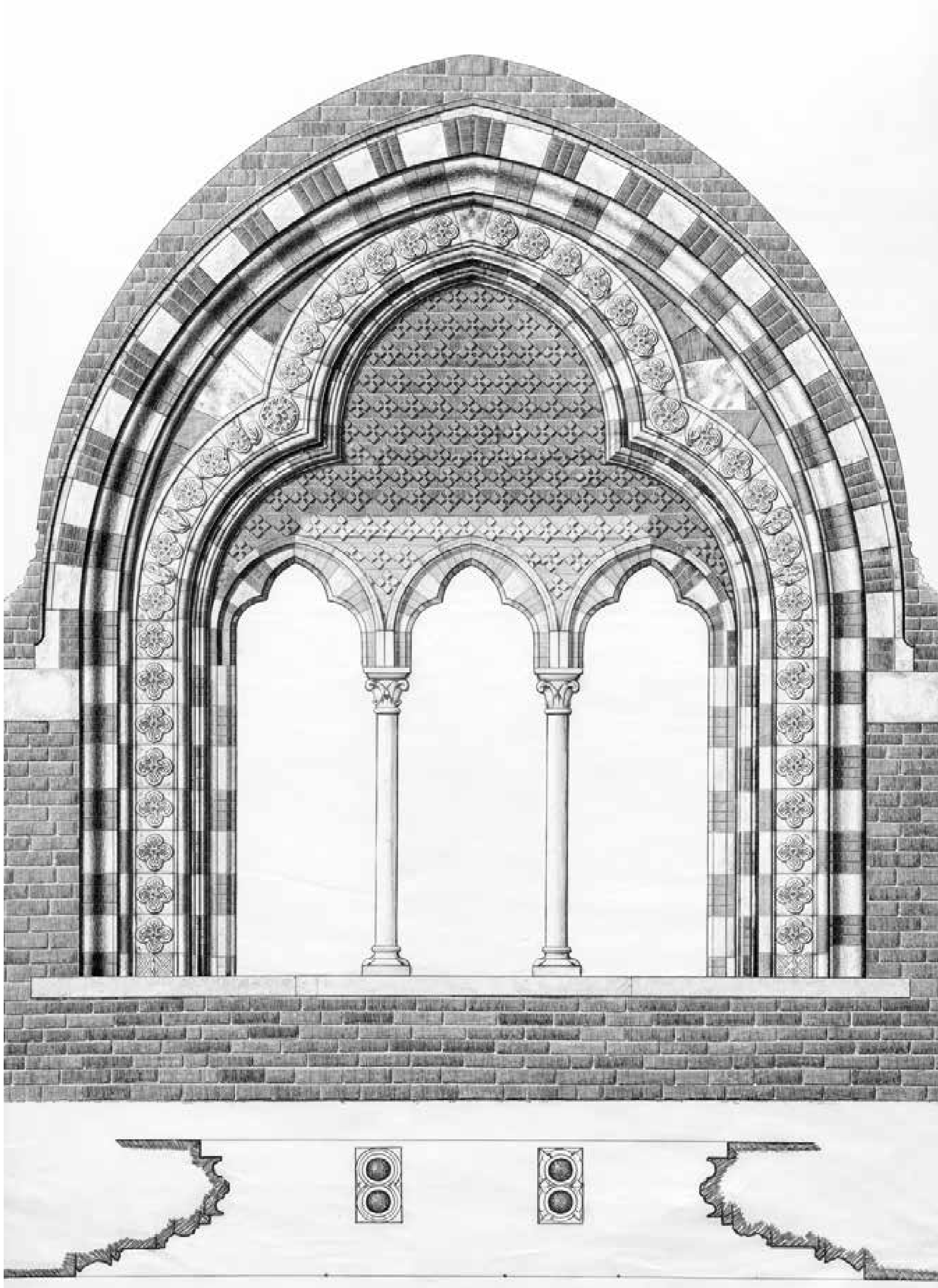
Figure 17. Interior view of the cloister. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

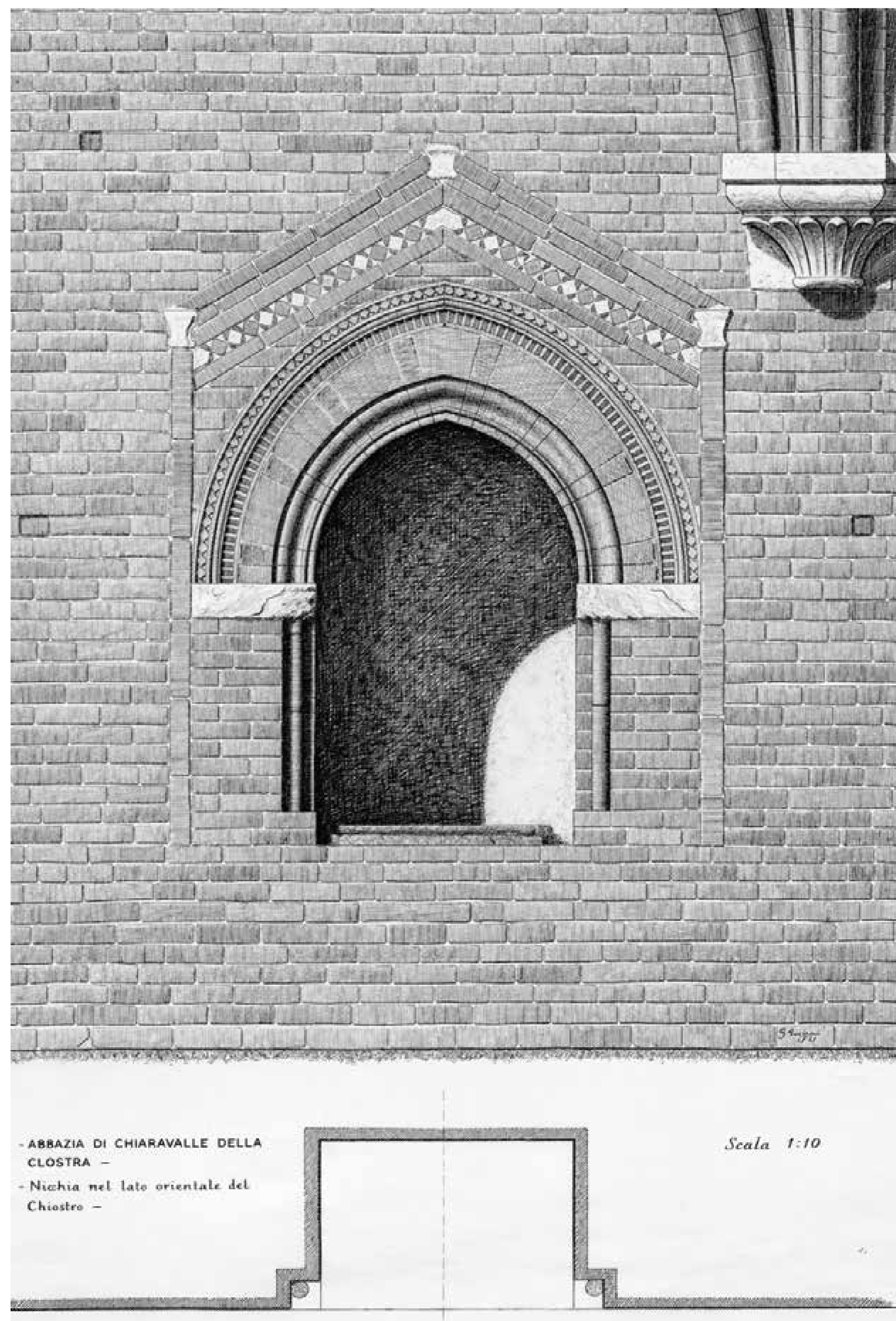
Figure 18. Interior view of the cloister. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

The foundation of the Abbey of Santa Maria della Colomba remains debated, with proposed dates ranging between 1132 and 1136. Earlier scholarship linked its origin to a 1132 meeting between Emperor Lothair II and Bernard of Clairvaux near Piacenza. More recent studies, however, place the arrival of the Cistercian monks between 1135 and 1136, supported by documents from April 1136 referring to a monastery "Columba nominatur" and granting it essential economic privileges. A papal privilege of 1137 issued by Innocent II confirmed approval of the new foundation. The first abbot, Giovanni of Clairvaux, soon oversaw further expansion, including the foundation of the Abbey of Fontevivo (1142).

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the abbey became an important center of Cistercian expansion in northern Italy, establishing dependent houses such as Abbey of Valserena (1298). Its prosperity was interrupted by military conflicts, most notably the destruction of 1248 by the army of Emperor Frederick II, after which only the church, chapter house, and cloister survived.

From the fifteenth century, the abbey underwent institutional and architectural transformations, including its grant in commendam (1444) and Baroque reconstruction. Suppressed in 1769 by Ferdinand of Parma, it was later expropriated during the Napoleonic period and transferred to Marie Louise of Parma. A renewed monastic presence was established in 1937 under the Cistercian Congregation of Casamari, marking the latest phase in the abbey's long history of continuity and transformation.





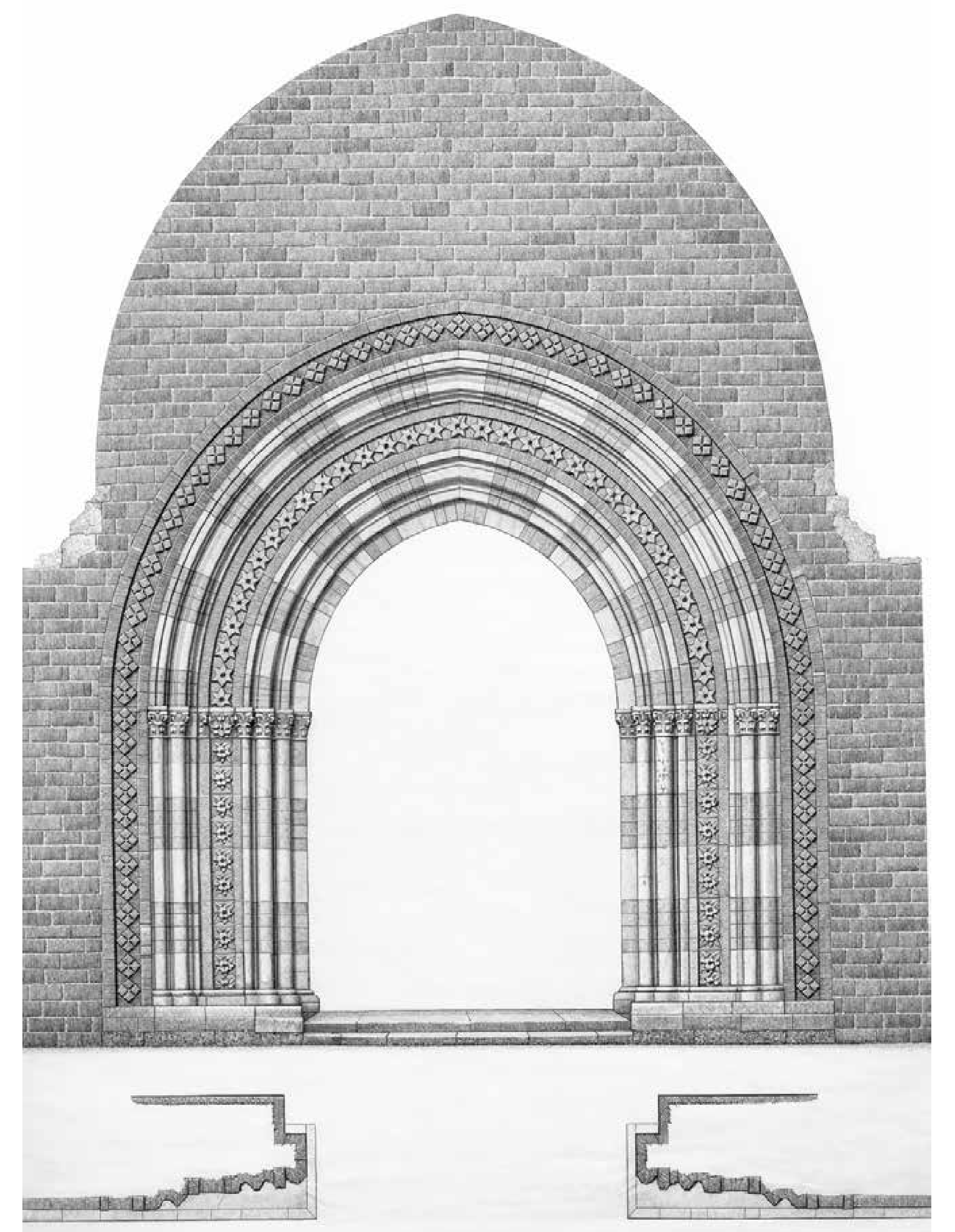


Figure 19, 20 and 21. A. "(PIACENZA) Alseno/ Abbazia di Chiaravalle/ – Rilievo di una finestra," negative photographic print, XX first half (approx. 1926–1940), Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Ministry of Culture (Italy). Accessed February 19, 2026.

Historical and Artistic Analysis

Recent scholarship by Corvi and Spinelli dates the construction of the **Abbey of Santa Maria della Colomba** between c. 1145 and the mid-thirteenth century, placing it within the formative phase of Cistercian architecture in northern Italy. The church follows a three-aisled basilican plan with ribbed cross-vaults over the central nave and smooth vaults over the aisles. The structural system—alternating square piers with engaged half-columns—has generated debate: some scholars interpret it as evidence of a design modification, while others, including Romanini, proposed an original sexpartite vaulting scheme comparable to Piacenza Cathedral.

Brick predominates, consistent with Cistercian practice in the Po Valley, contrasted by light stone details. Decorative elements are restrained: capitals feature simplified vegetal and geometric motifs, while corbels remain plain. The choir follows a Bernardine layout, flanked by six chapels, two of which were later modified in Baroque style. The façade, articulated by buttresses and blind arcades, centers on a thirteenth-century marble rose window and a portico of similar date.

The cloister, dating to the late thirteenth or fourteenth century, is among the best-preserved Cistercian examples in the region. Square in plan, it is distinguished by sculpted colonnettes and decorated corbels—features that signal a departure from early Cistercian austerity. The chapter house, restored after its nineteenth-century collapse, retains an elaborate portal and reconstructed triforas. Other parts of the complex were substantially rebuilt between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Spatial and Symbolic Analysis of the Cloister

The cloister of the Abbey of Santa Maria della Colomba is interpreted here not as a decorative garden but as a disciplinary and contemplative device, consistent with the principles articulated by **Bernard of Clairvaux** in the *Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem*. Its architecture privileges rhythm, repetition, enclosure, and regulated movement over sensory richness.

Spatially, it operates through the repetition of identical bays, a measured relationship between interior and exterior, and a central void defined by absence. Symbolically, this reflects Bernard's conception of the *hortus conclusus* as an inward, ascetic garden of the soul. The cloister does not represent paradise; it structures withdrawal from the visible.

Methodologically, the analysis combines Bernardine texts, architectural morphology, and experiential reading of movement and silence, framing the cloister as a theological spatial practice rather than a symbolic image.

Precedents and Inspirations for Intervention

Figure 22. Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum in Cologne (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Figure 23. Abbey of Our Lady of Nový Dvůr by John Pawson Bohemia, Czech Republic 2009 – 2014. Photography by Gilbert McCarragher (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Figure 24. Le Corbusier Couvet Saint-Marie De La Tourette. Photo essay by Thilo Rohländer (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

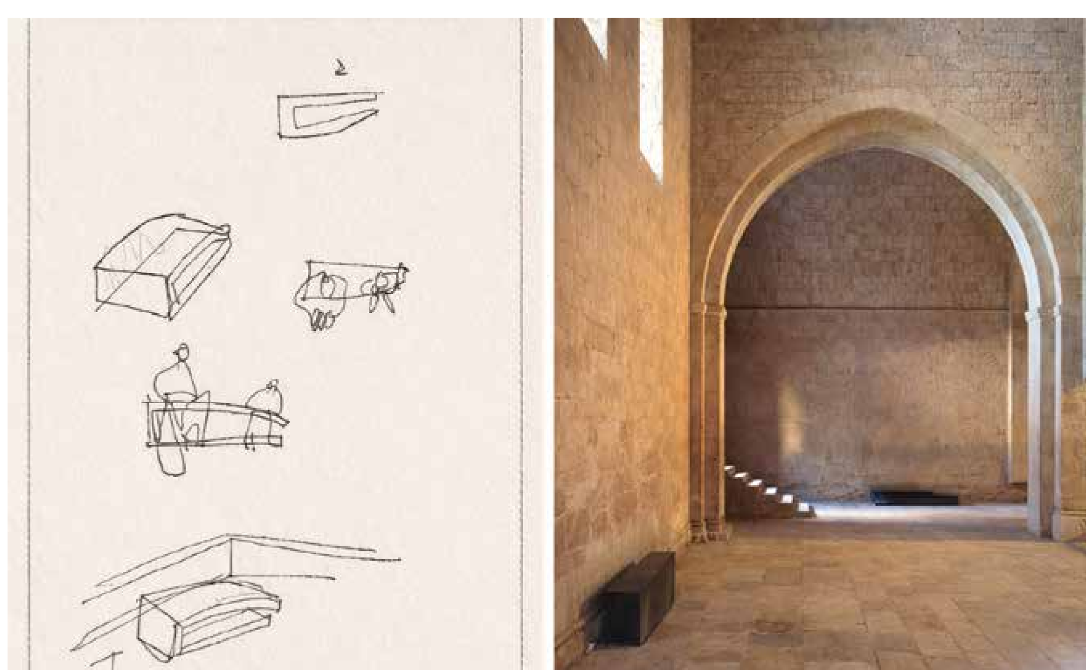


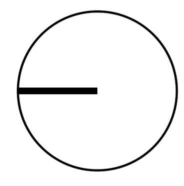
Figure 25. John Pawson's intervention at Le Thoronet, photograph/illustration, in Un banco, una flecha, unas palabras: las intervenciones de Pawson, Siza y Souto de Moura en la abadía de Thoronet, by Nieves Fernandez Villalobos

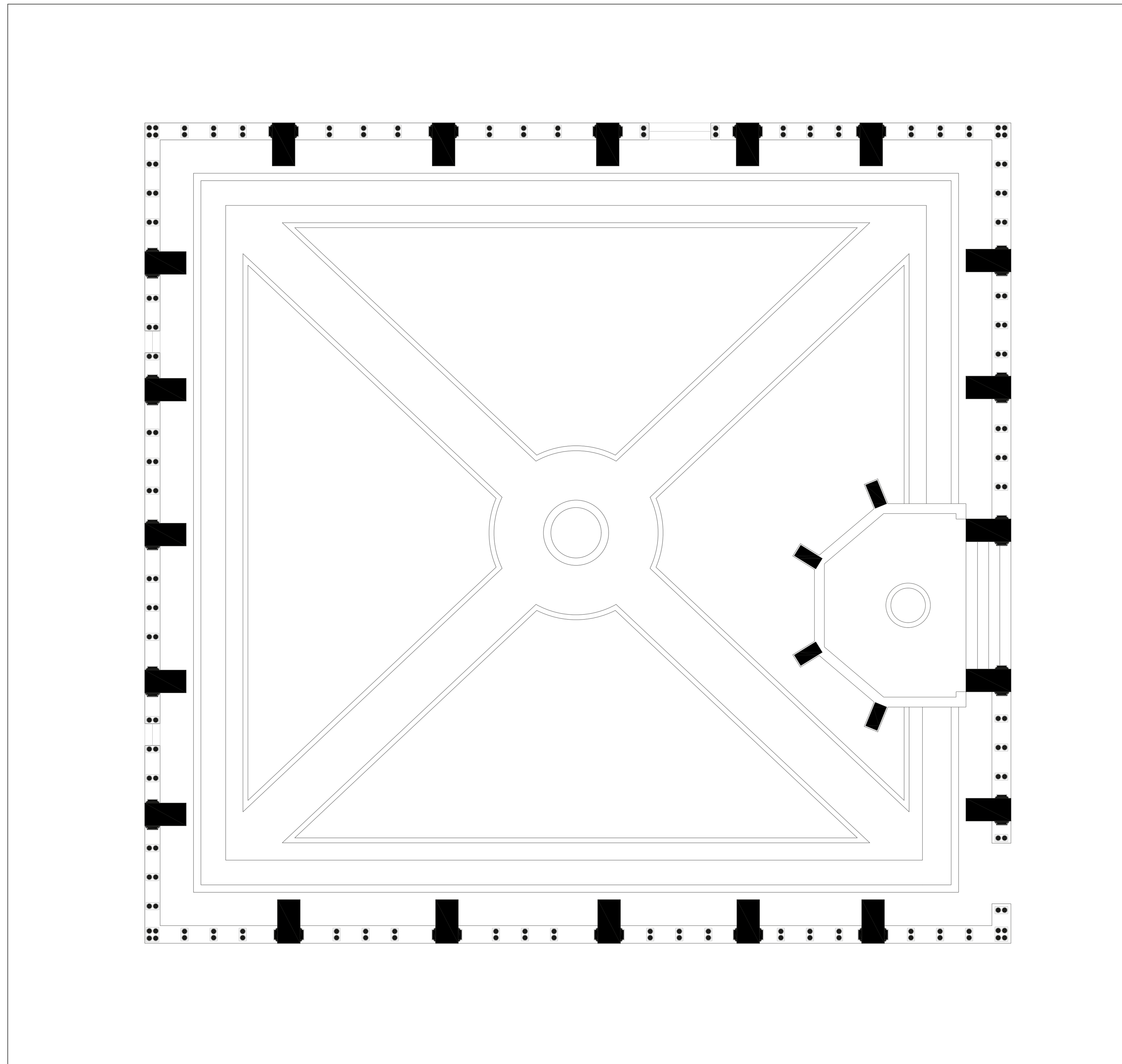
Figure 26. Alvaro Siza's intervention at Le Thoronet, photograph/illustration, in Un banco, una flecha, unas palabras: las intervenciones de Pawson, Siza y Souto de Moura en la abadía de Thoronet, by Nieves Fernandez Villalobos

Figure 27. Soto de Moura's intervention at Le Thoronet, photograph/illustration, in Un banco, una flecha, unas palabras: las intervenciones de Pawson, Siza y Souto de Moura en la abadía de Thoronet, by Nieves Fernandez Villalobos

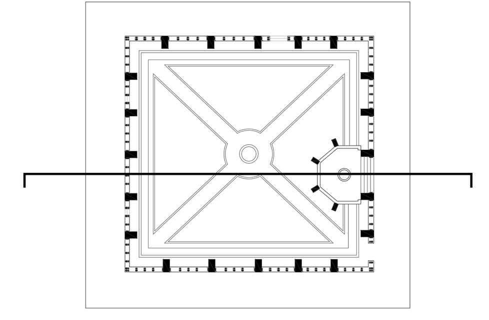
Chapter 5

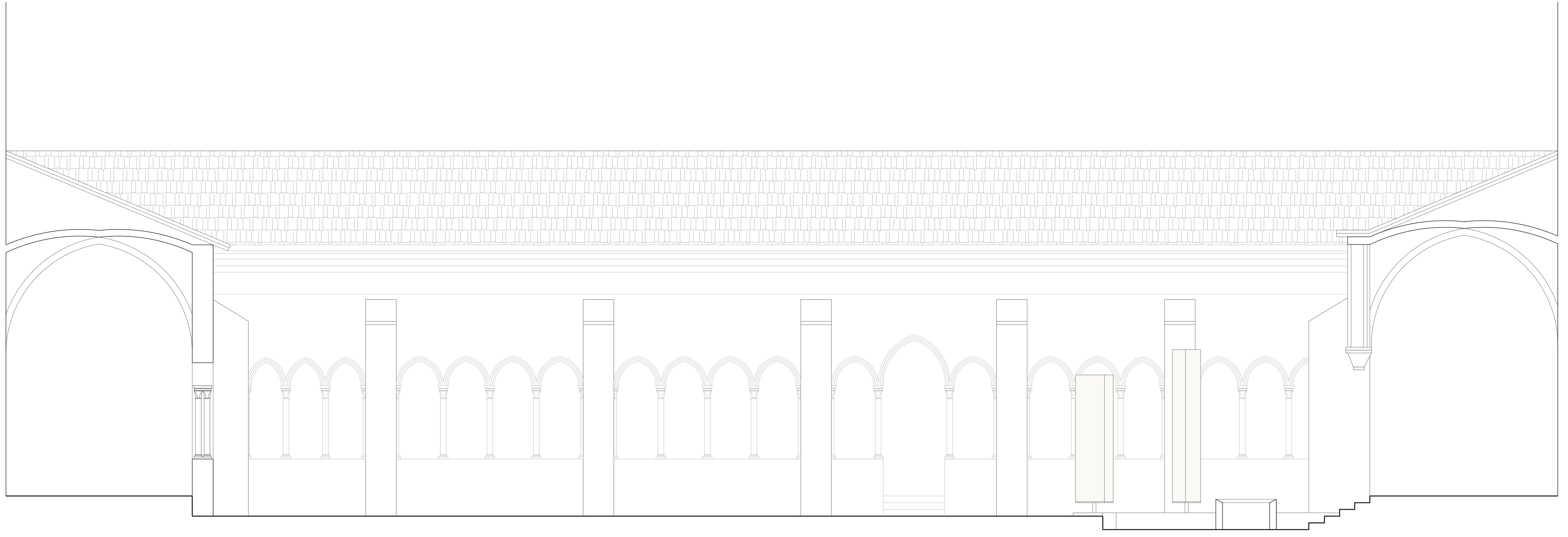
Contemporary Intervention: Reinterpreting the Cloister Garden



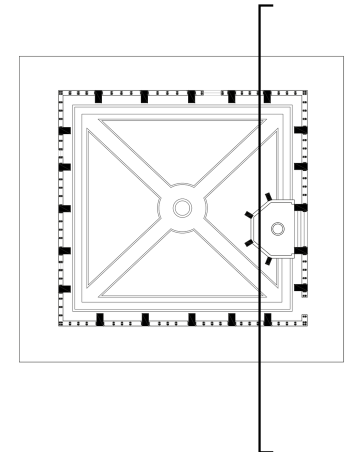


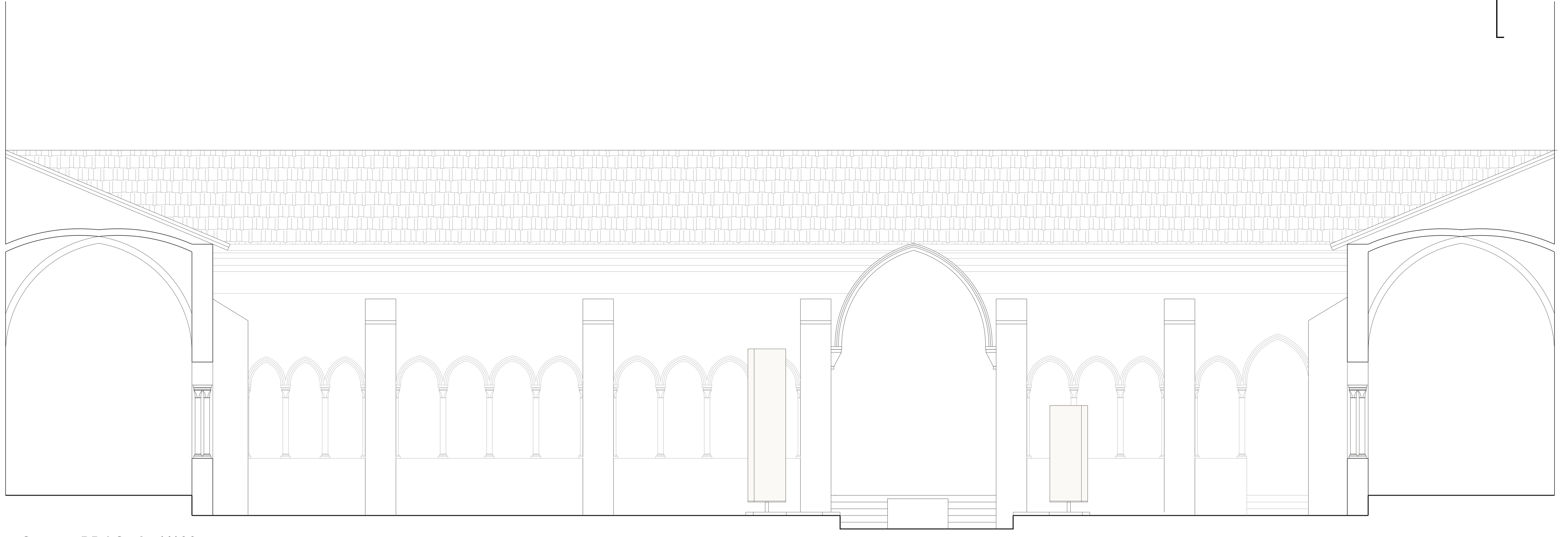
General plan | Scale 1/150



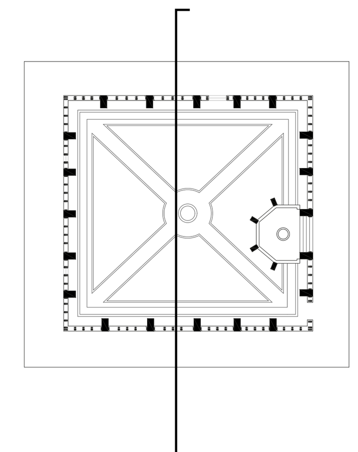


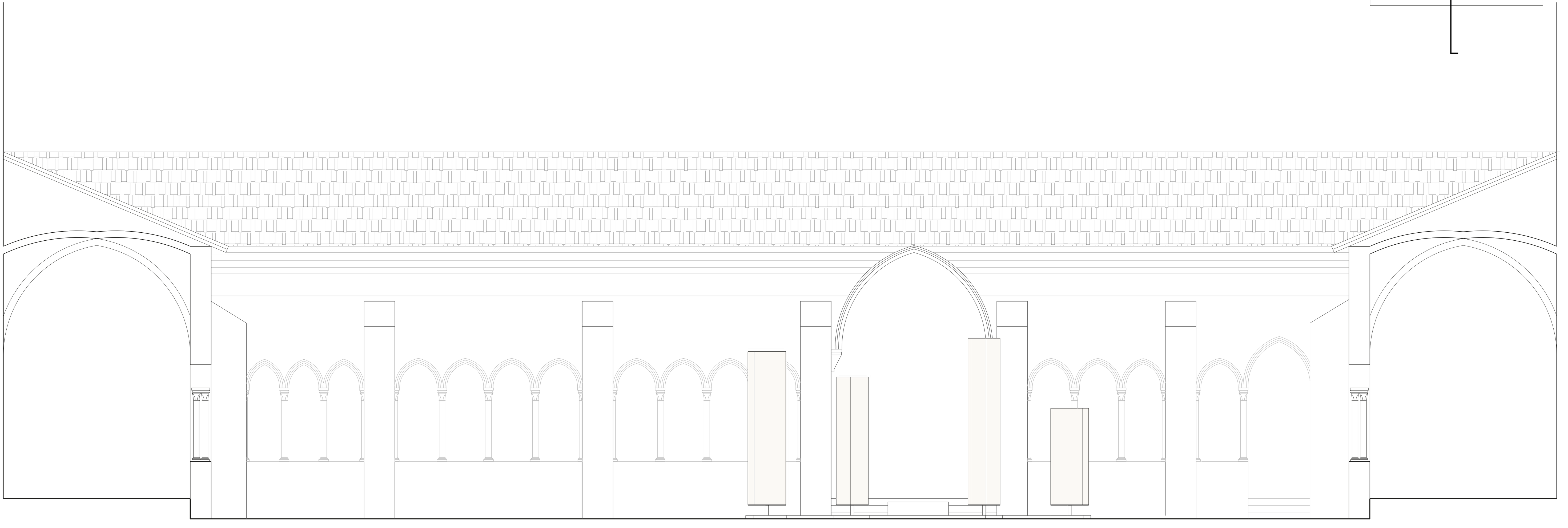
Section AA | Scale 1/100



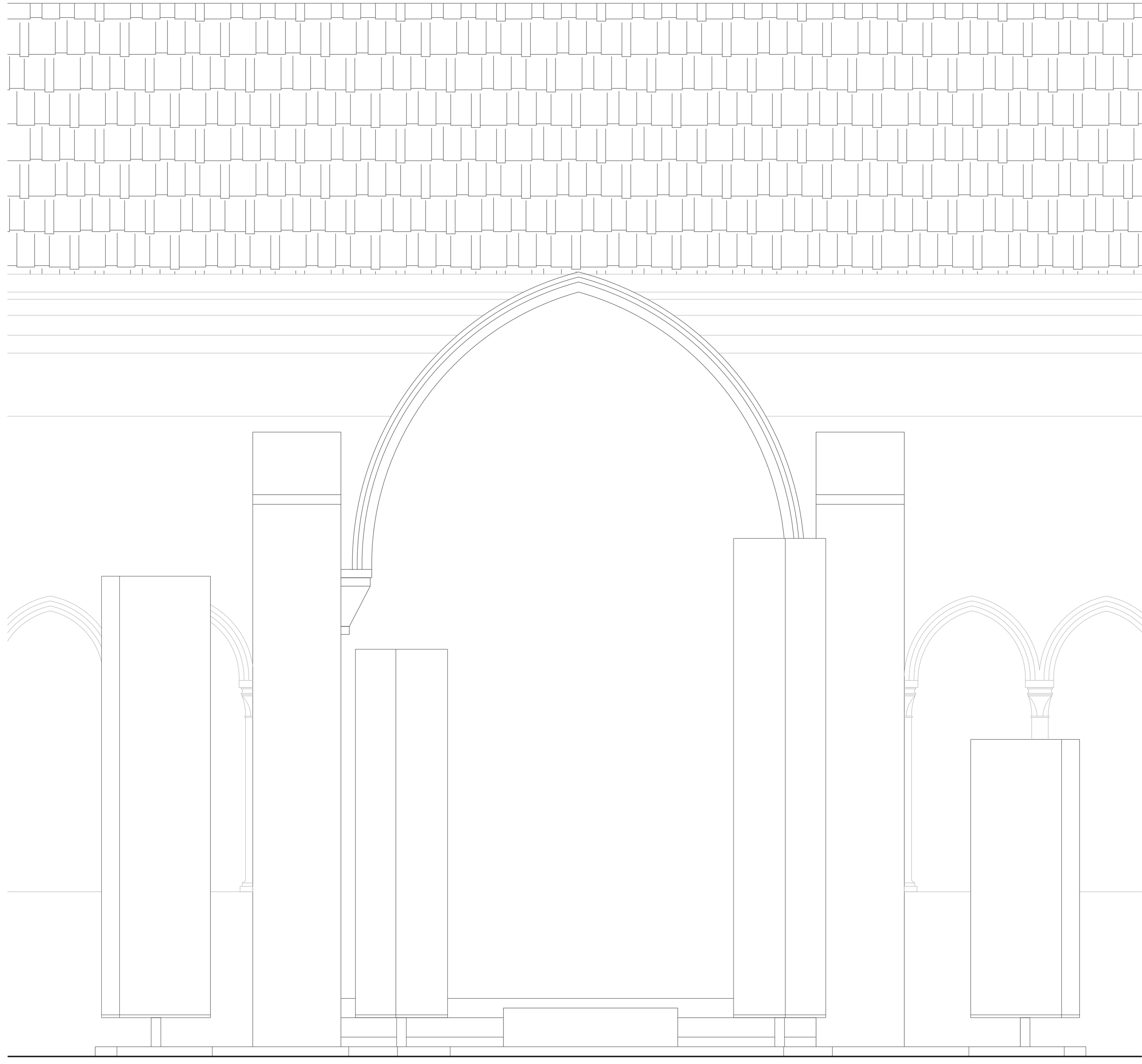


Section BB | Scale 1/100

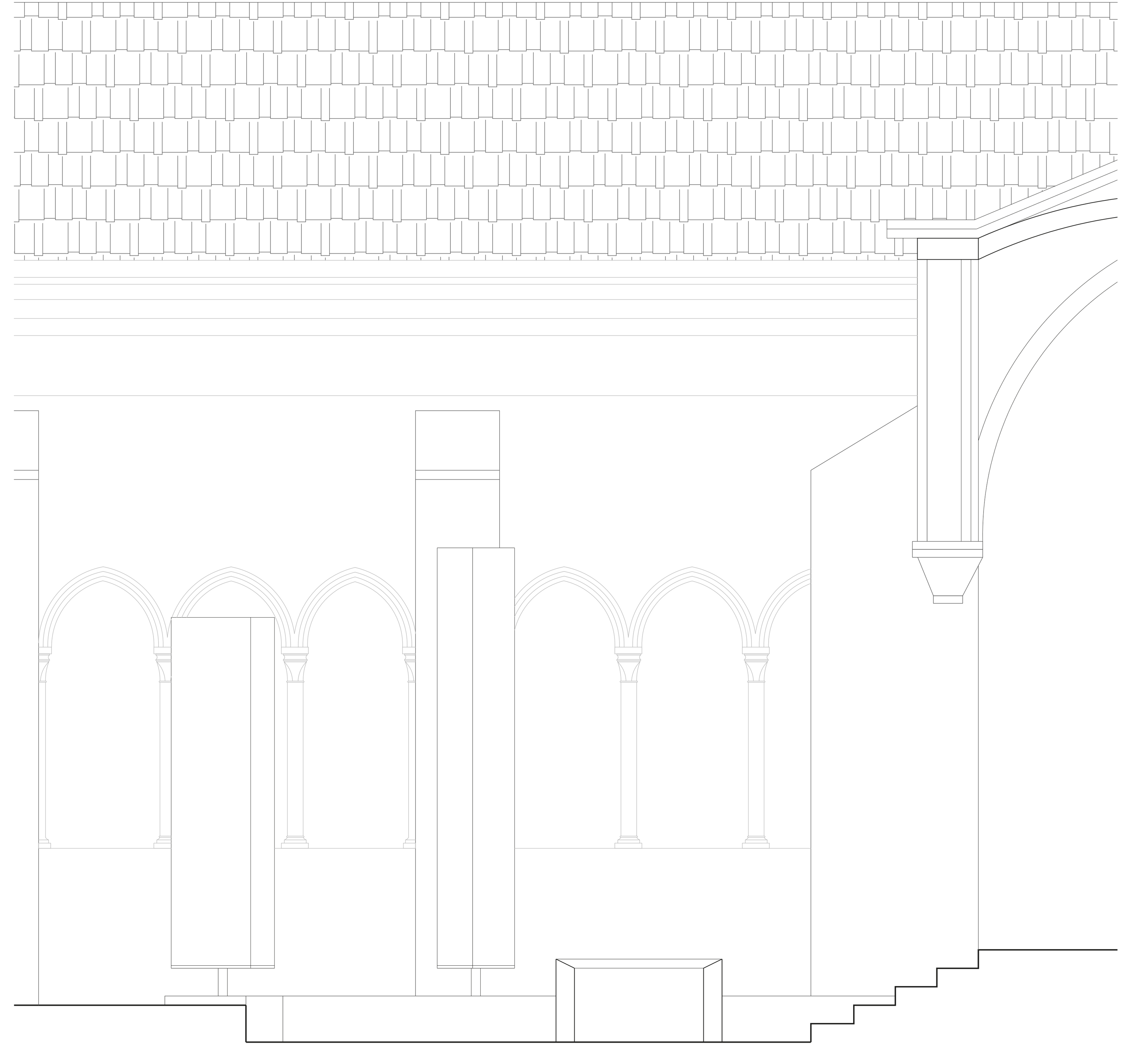




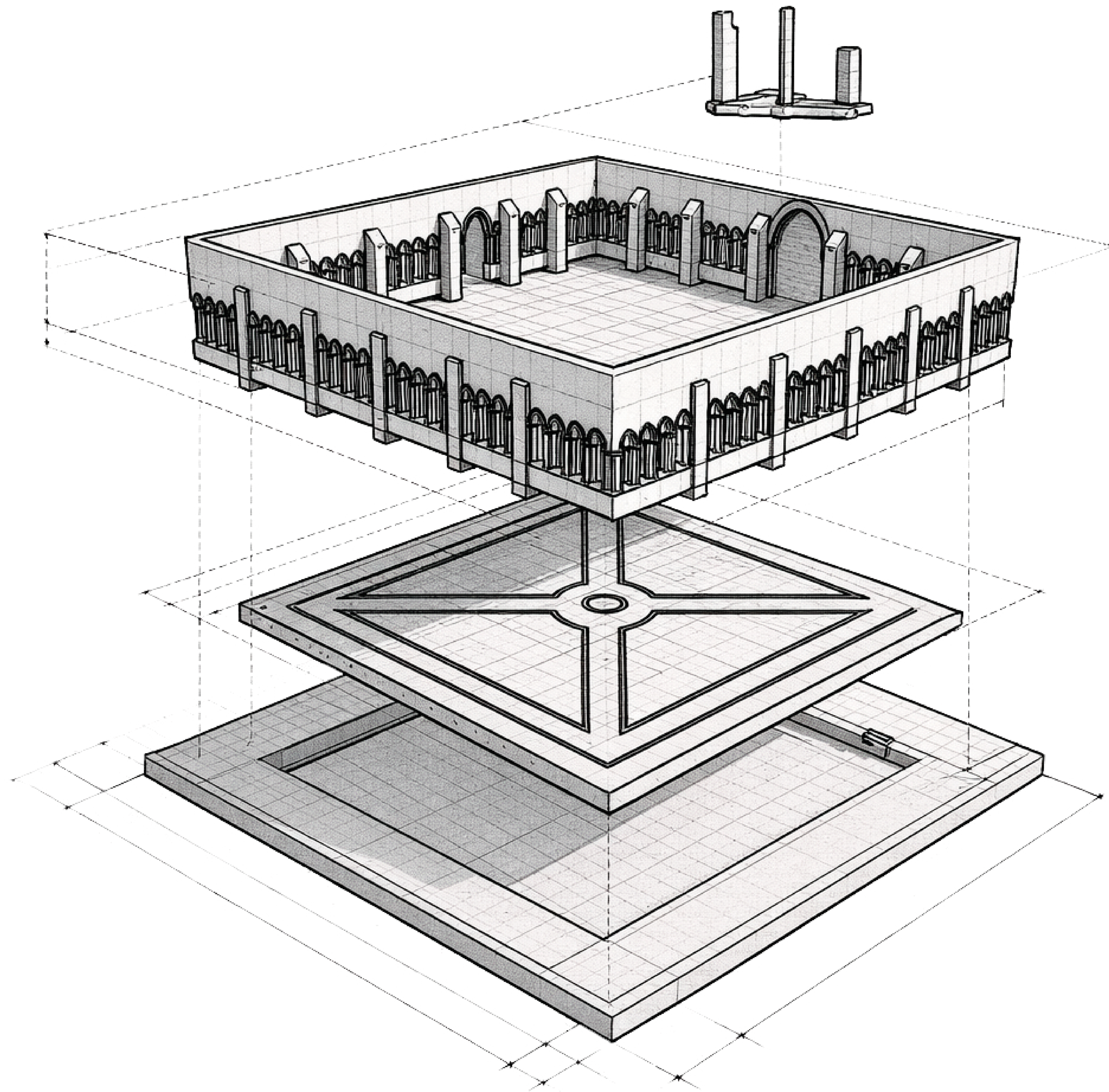
Section CC | Scale 1/100



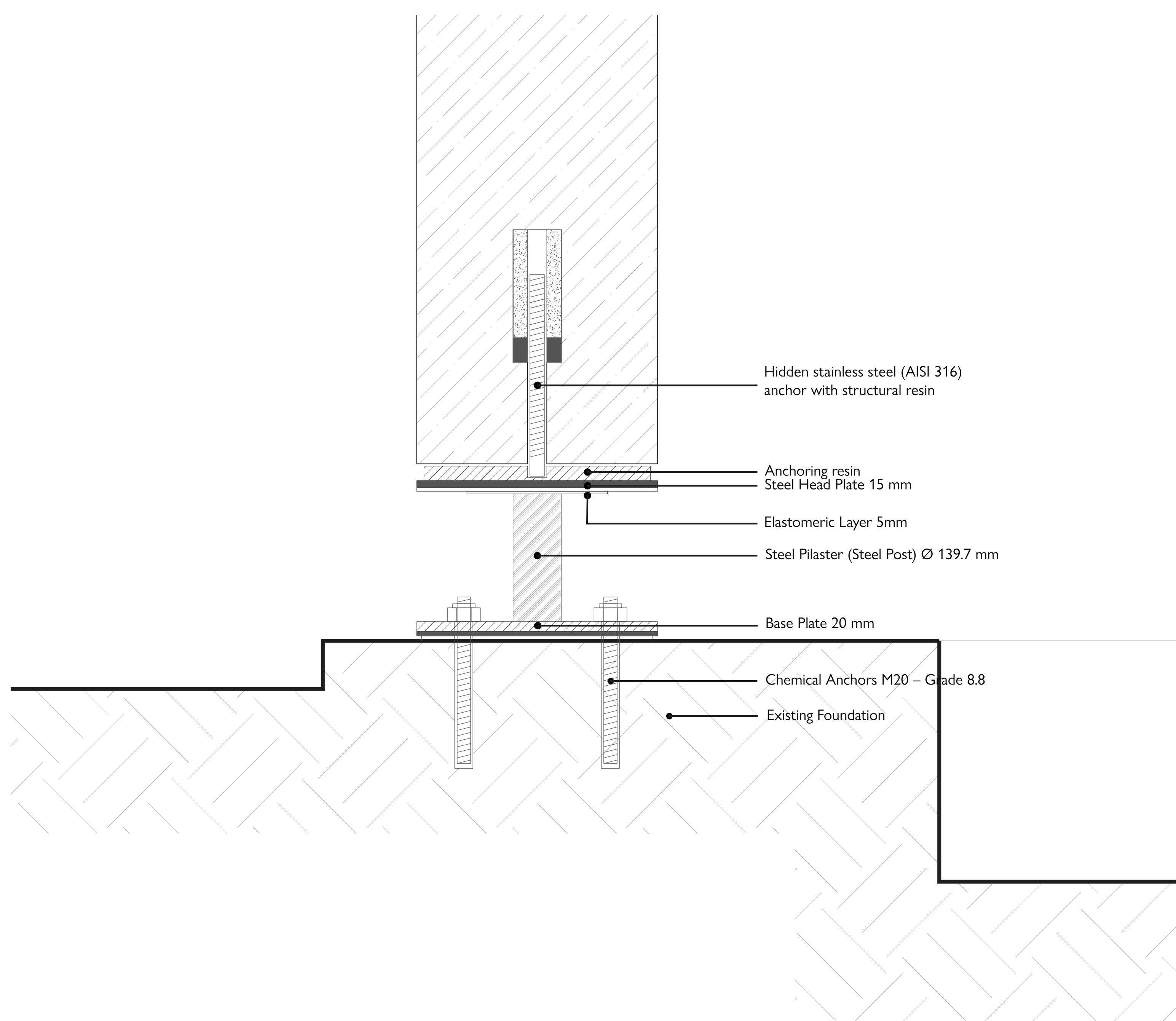
Section CC (detail) | Scale 1/50



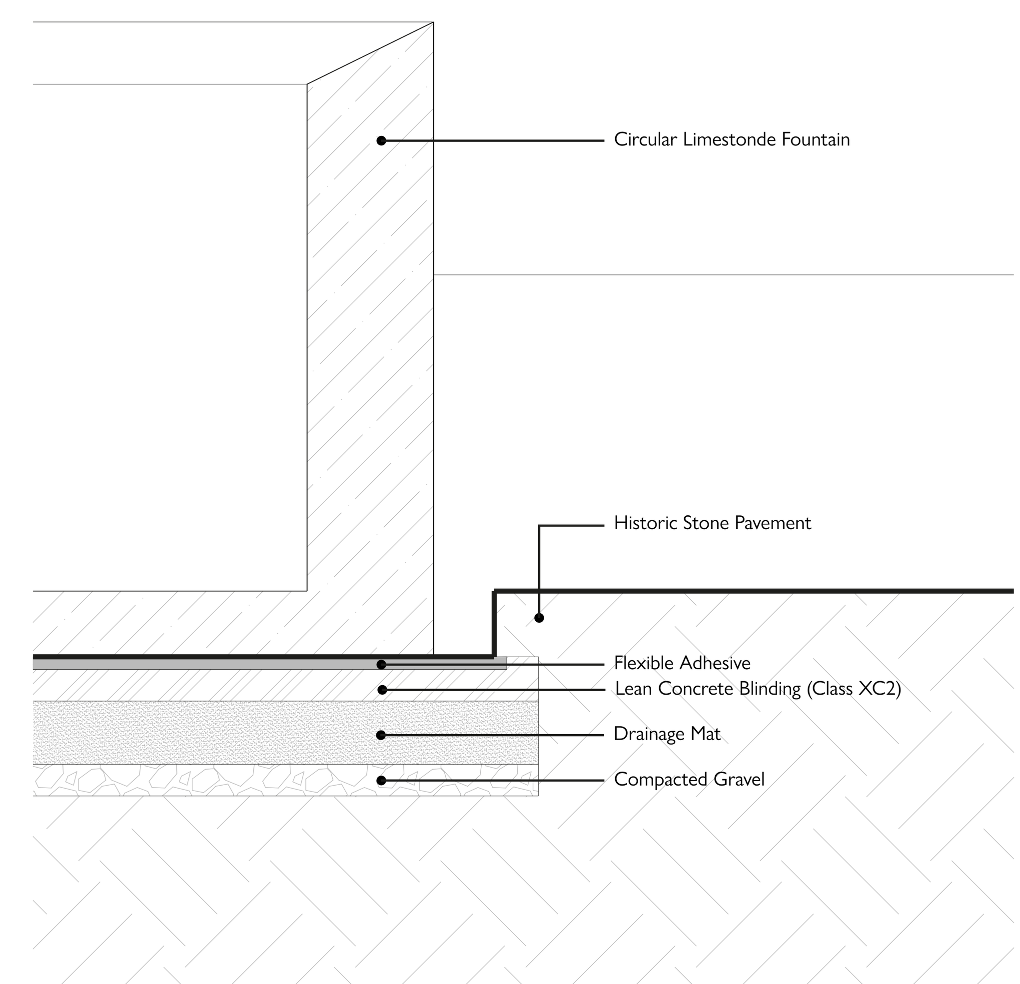
Section AA (detail) | Scale 1/50



Axonometric view



Detail 1 | Column and pedestal | Scale 1/10



Detail 2 | Fountain Basin | Scale 1/10